



it's chocolate season

Handmade truffles, flowing fountains, creative cream fillings and other sweet somethings around town.

LIQUID BROWN. At Hedonist Artisan Chocolates, co-owner Jennifer Posey uses a special tool to dip truffles in chocolate.

by Nancy O'Donnell and Kathy Quinn Thomas
Photos by Lisa Hughes

There's the chemical explanation: Stimulants in chocolate such as caffeine and theobromine deliver the kick, and a kind little substance known as phenylethylamine combines with dopamine in the brain to produce a mild antidepressant effect.

And then there's simply the taste explanation. The sensuous quality of the cacao tree's processed fruit has proven irresistible for centuries. The Mayans worshipped it, concocting cocoa beverages as the champagne of the elite class. The Aztecs used cocoa beans as currency; Christopher Columbus brought beans back to Spain as examples of coins from the New World. Eventually, "drinking chocolates" became the rage; the first chocolate house opened in London in 1657. Whatever the explanation, this is the perfect season to indulge in some good old-fashioned, mood-sweetening chocolate consumption. (Confectioners consider October through Mother's Day as "chocolate season," putting us in the thick of it now.)

But life is too short—and the good stuff too pleasing—to bother with just any old chocolate. We turned to local chocolatiers in search of the best and freshest locally crafted treats, and we sniffed out some awe-inspiring recipes from bakers who have won awards at the annual Chocolate Ball fundraiser (this year set for Feb. 2; for details, see page 47).

Take a sampling of what's being made in town—and bring your sweet tooth with you.

Keeping hedonists happy

Hedonist Artisan Chocolates: The name says it all. In the hands of chocolatiers Jennifer Posey and Zahra Langford, handmade truffles and medallions, fruits and nuts, crystallized ginger and candied orange peels "enrobed" in chocolate become not just sweets to

swallow but an anthem to sensual pleasure.

Langford said her aunt helped the couple choose the name: "We'd tell my aunt about all our travels and the good things we'd eaten, and she said, 'You guys are a couple of hedonists.'"

Fellow hedonists can choose from a menu of bonbons that changes with the seasons, such as truffles infused with rosemary and lavender or spiced with wasabi. A new line of truffles marries teas—Earl Gray, chai, jasmine, chamomile—with chocolate. Hedonist Chocolates has just added exotic spiced "drinking chocolates" to its product line (and not the usual spice suspects, either; drinking chocolate with lavender and lemongrass, anyone?). For special orders, Hedonist has crafted chocolates with rose petals and even Kentucky Derby bourbon truffles.

Posey and Langford use French chocolate (70 percent in dark chocolate) and as many organic ingredients as possible—locally grown if available. The California natives, now ensconced in the South Wedge, sell on-line and, locally, at Equal Grounds Coffee House and Coffee Connection on South Avenue, The Cheese Shop at Wine Sense on Park Avenue and Moonlight Creamery in Fairport. They've also become a hit at Ravines Wine Cellars on Keuka Lake. Their goat cheese truffle—with an assist from Lively Run Goat Dairy in Hammondsport—was created as a companion to a fine glass of Cabernet or Merlot.

"I like to play with food, different flavors, different profiles," said Posey, who worked for a time wrapping chocolate bars in the kitchen of California chocolatier Richard Donnelly (whose work frequently shows up in Williams & Sonoma catalogs).

The couple often say theirs is a "chocolate for adults," or at least for adult palates. "Lots of people don't know what high-end chocolate is like," Langford said. At one of their periodic "tastings," a small boy



THE SWEET SCIENCE. Jennifer Posey, left, and Zahra Langford love to experiment with unusual flavors in their Hedonist chocolates. Some, such as an African pepper truffle, don't make the cut.

insisted on trying a sample. “We told the parents this wasn’t the chocolate he was used to, but they insisted.” (The taste test ended as expected.)

So it’s not for everyone. But Posey and Langford aren’t complaining. They’re happy with their business plan, as stated on their brochures: “to make great chocolate and enjoy life, two things we think we pair very well together.”

Best bet: Hedonist truffles, which sell

for \$2 each. Boxes hold 5, 10 or 20 pieces. For more information, call 355-7913.

Go with the flow

Chocolate fountains are becoming *de rigueur* at area weddings, bar mitzvahs, Quinceañeras, corporate gatherings or wherever chocoholics congregate. So what happens when grownups meet a continuous flow of chocolate?

“Every event, someone comes up

“Lots of people don’t know what high-end chocolate is like.”

—Zahra Langford of Hedonist Artisan Chocolates

with a coffee cup and wants it straight in the cup,” said Laurylann Romeo, owner of Penfield-based It’s Raining Chocolate.

After four years in business, Romeo owns six chocolate fountains and offers 60 different flavors to coat the attendant strawberries, figs, grapes, coconuts, cookies (including Twinkies), ice cream bars (most anything edible, really). She has even covered Cheeseballs (the crunchy kind) at a customer’s request.

Her most expensive spread so far? The fountains for a \$100,000 wedding at a local country club.

And there's enough demand for more than one local business. Laura and Bill Ficarro run Flowing Fondue Chocolate Fountain Rentals, buying "only the best Belgian chocolate" because they said it "flows the best." Their spreads include fruits, pretzels and Italian cookies. They, too, have seen their share of people overcome by the sight of a curtain of moving chocolate.

"We stand behind the table to make sure we keep the fingers out," said Laura. But during one garden party, a big gust of wind sprayed chocolate all over the guests' suits. "They were great and laughed it off," Ficarro said. "They also had been drinking a lot."

How to find them: On-line at www.flowingfonduechocolatefountains.com or 359-1595; www.itsrainingchocolate.com or 967-6800.



TAKE A DIP. Fountains make chocolate an interactive experience.

Sweet shop service

For some 40 years, Peter Livadas has been creating cream-filled chocolates and sponge candy in his Peter's Sweet Shop in the South Wedge. He prides himself on offering 46 kinds of cream fillings and novelties such as 3-foot-high chocolate rabbits, slices of chocolate pizza and chocolate golf balls. The 82-year-old Livadas makes them all, starting with his "top secret" blend of three chocolates that arrive in 50-pound boxes.

The business has changed since he first began. "We have the competition with the big stores, and the smaller

stores disappear," he said. "We had to learn how to give customers something the big stores don't."

For example, one local woman who was throwing a sweet-16 party for her granddaughter wanted "big Kisses." So Livadas made 200 half-pound Hershey's Kiss-shaped party favors, then fabricated a mold out of a metal bowl to fashion a five-pound Kiss-shaped centerpiece.

He also has an old-school approach, using traditional machinery and antique German chocolate molds. Once upon a time, says friend and helper Jimmy Kaiser, Livadas "used to mix all this by hand. I remember when, at Easter when the shop was really busy, his arm would swell up to twice its size from the mixing."

That never bothered Livadas. "If you love it, it is not work," he said.

Best bet: Peter's Mountain of Chocolate in the 10-pound box of assorted creams, for \$125. Located at 880 S. Clinton Ave.; 442-6770.

Tried and true treats

By now it's second nature to call Stever's Candies, Inc., a Rochester institution. They've been creating confections since 1946, after founder Douglas Stever apprenticed himself to a candy man in Pennsylvania and then opened up shop with wife Hilda. Today, son Kevin and his wife, Leslie, run the Park Avenue business.

"We use tried and true old-fashioned recipes," said Kevin. "Licorice, melt-aways, peanut brittle, croquettes (a.k.a. turtles), cashew glaze, creams, nougats and caramels. We haven't changed, and it's what people want."

Stever's also makes sponge candy, the molasses aerated foam blocks beloved in western New York. Buffalo is considered the epicenter of sponge candy madness, with Rochester a close second.

"It's made in a loaf, and then we cut the crust off with a handsaw and coat the center part with chocolate," said Kevin.

Best bet: Stever's raspberry clusters mingle fresh raspberries with dark chocolate drizzle. They're made only three days before Valentine's Day and should be eaten the day of purchase, according to Kevin. Located at 623 Park Ave.; 473-2098.

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Nancy O'Donnell is a freelance writer and adjunct instructor at MCC.
Kathy Quinn Thomas is a local writer.

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